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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Reactions to a US Declaration of War on North Vietnam

1. A US declaration of war on North Vietnam would be a surprise to Communists and non-Communists alike. Foreign governments and opinion would feel compelled to reconsider their views of US intentions.
2. The general interpretation would be that this act was intended to lay the groundwork for escalating the war, and to justify larger objectives, perhaps the destruction of the DRV regime. Protestations about US desires for negotiations would be widely disbelieved. If the US reiterated the limited nature of its aims, this effect would be mitigated, but not, in our view, very much. Legal explanations having to do with, say, establishing POW status for captured US pilots or meeting the requirements of domestic legislation would not be credited; most would regard the declaration as far too sweeping a move to be intended for such limited purposes.

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Communist Reactions

3. North Vietnam. The DRV would anticipate an extension of US air attacks and attempts to close its ports. Most importantly, the declaration would strengthen Hanoi's fears of a US invasion. These fears would probably lead the DRV to develop or hasten contingency planning for the introduction of Chinese ground forces. There is a chance that the declaration itself would lead Hanoi immediately to request such intervention, but it seems more likely that the North Vietnamese would await further developments before taking this step.

4. The declaration would bear on Hanoi's internal debates about the proper conduct of the insurgency in South Vietnam. Those who are concerned to avoid an expansion of the war would warn of further escalation and, if the Congressional majority were large, would argue against counting on internal divisions to inhibit US policy. At the same time, however, their position would be undermined by the inference that the US, having formally declared war, would settle the conflict only on its own terms. Thus, although the move would be an important indication of US resolve to persevere, it almost certainly would not elicit concessions from Hanoi.

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5. We think it unlikely that the DRV would reciprocate by declaring war on the US. Such a counter-declaration would not, so far as we know, invoke any treaties with its allies, and Hanoi would still wish to represent the basic conflict as the struggle of the people of South Vietnam against US imperialism and its Saigon puppets, complicated by unilateral US aggression against the North. A DRV declaration of war might secure POW treatment for captured PAVN forces, but we believe that Hanoi would prefer not to acknowledge its involvement in this fashion. If this is correct, then the DRV probably would not alter its plans for treatment of captured US personnel in response to the US declaration.

6. While extending renewed pledges of aid Peking probably would not react to the US declaration in any important new way. But the declaration itself would heighten its apprehension that the US intended ultimately to destroy the DRV regime and, by extension, would welcome a pretext to attack China. Thus, while future Chinese actions would still depend primarily on what the US actually did, the declaration of war would increase somewhat the chances of Chinese misinterpretations and sharp reactions in future contingencies.

7. The USSR. The Soviet Union would once again be confronted with the dilemma of having assumed obligations, albeit vague ones, which it can fulfill at tolerable risk only so long as the war remains limited. Moscow would once again feel impelled to urge upon Hanoi the uses of diplomacy, but it would almost certainly not find such a time appropriate for serious pressure in this direction. The US declaration would produce renewed pledges of Soviet support and probably another agreement on military assistance designed to meet Hanoi's fears of an invasion.

8. With the US formally at war with North Vietnam, the USSR would feel compelled drastically to reduce any elements of cooperation in its relations with the US. It seems certain that Moscow would not enter into any East-West agreements, at Geneva or elsewhere, while the US was in a state of war with a fraternal socialist state.

Non-Communist Reactions

9. The non-Communist world would recognize in the US declaration a strong resolve to prevail in the context of force. It would accordingly discount US professions of willingness to negotiate and would expect further escalation.

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10. This interpretation would give some pause to US allies already involved in combatting the insurgency. Australia and New Zealand would, at a minimum, seek clarification of US policy and express concern at the possibility that they had assumed commitments which might escape their control. South Korea, on the other hand, would not be similarly disturbed. Other governments, for example the Philippines, which are considering various forms of participation in South Vietnam would see in the US declaration, and the possibilities which it opened, a reason to avoid involvement.

11. The Japanese have been most sensitive to the possibilities of an expanded war involving direct Chinese Communist participation. Public opposition to US actions in Vietnam -- which has subsided considerably over the past two months -- would grow, making it more difficult for Prime Minister Sato to acquiesce in US use of its military bases in Japan and Okinawa to support the Vietnam war.

12. A declaration of war would give legal foundation to the closure of North Vietnamese ports by mining or blockade. We believe that, if the US undertook such measures without a declaration, Free World shipping would not attempt to continue

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calling at these ports. A formal declaration would, in this context, help shippers to come more quickly to such a decision, and would serve to silence legal objections.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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